

## *Unreality Show*

*James Penha*

A member of the original television generation, I grew up in front of a small cathode ray tube. Color cartoons in black and white...*I Love Lucy*...and especially the quiz shows. I think I gained more cultural literacy from Hal March and Jack Barry and Bert Parks and all the other TV quizmasters than from my beloved books, and although I learned to reason in school, my mastering of the intricate rules of those first video games honed a sense of cause and effect – an imperfect sense, I learned later.

The new wave of reality quiz shows on the tube these days reminds me of the unreality of those older programs and of my tiny role in the saga of the scandal that ultimately rocked American television in the Fifties. My own part was barely a pebble – so small that, at the time, I didn't even notice its place in the landslide.

Because my family lived in New York City, the capital of live television in the 1950s, I frequently had the opportunity, during my childhood, to join the studio audience for my favorite quiz shows. At the close of every broadcast, as the hot lights dimmed, each show's producer invited audience members interested in appearing on future programs to remain for interviews. I knew I was too young to have a chance on *Dotto* or *Tic Tac Dough* or *Break the Bank*, but *The Big Payoff*, a daily program on the Columbia Broadcasting System, presented a

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*"Life is a sum of all your choices." Albert Camus ~§~ "The road to suc-*

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weekly segment on which a child could win \$500 in prizes by answering three general-knowledge questions.

One day, after my mother and I had witnessed a *Big Payoff* broadcast, I waited for an interview. I wanted my shot at the \$500 and at TV stardom! The producer asked me my name and age and what my hobbies were. He sought to discern, I knew, whether I had the ebullience and fluency required of a contestant on live TV. As well, he focused his attention on my intellectual ability to survive a contest. “What subjects do you enjoy in the third grade, Jackie?”

“History and Reading,” I replied.

“What are you studying in History now?”

“The discovery of America.”

“Can you tell me how many ships Columbus had?”

“Three: the Niña, the Pinta, the Santa Maria,” I proclaimed loudly, ebulliently. I congratulated myself: how smart a little boy I was!

“Very good. And what book have you read in school lately?”

“The fairy tales of *Hans Christian Andersen*.”

“Then have you seen,” said the producer, “that new Danny Kaye movie?”

“Oh, yes, for my birthday my mom took me to see *Hans Christian Andersen* at Radio City Music Hall. I love musicals; I love Danny Kaye,” I said. I wondered, might my appearance on *The Big Payoff* mark the debut of a new Danny Kaye?

“Do you like pop music as much as you enjoy movie musicals?”

“Sure.” My family didn’t own a record player in those days, so radio’s top forty determined my taste in songs. “I really like ‘That’s Amore’ by Dean Martin.”

“Can you sing any of it?”

Here was an opportunity to demonstrate the kind of ebullience producers think viewers want to see on quiz shows.

I stood and belted it out: “When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie...that’s *amore...*” I’m sure my squeaky voice made me sound more like Jerry Lewis than like Dean Martin...but was I ever ebullient!

“Okay, Jackie, if we ever decide to invite you to be on the show, we’ll call you the week before the broadcast.”

By the time my mother and I had reached home after our long subway ride from Manhattan, my elder brother had already answered a telephone call from the producer: I would be a contestant on *The Big Payoff* the following Tuesday!

On that day, I skipped school to be sure to arrive at the studio well in advance of the program’s three o’clock start. My mom made me wear a blue shirt (better for television, the producer had told her) and my most colorful bow tie.

Soon after three p.m., hostess Bess Meyerson escorted me to my mark opposite quizmaster Warren Hull. I was on the air! I heard the audience applaud although I could not see beyond the lights and cameras trained on Warren and me. I noticed Warren’s pock-marked face; it didn’t look that way on the TV screen at home. And I saw that Warren said no words but those he read from big posters hoisted by a crewman (Welcome, Jackie. If you answer three questions, you will win prizes worth \$500, including a nineteen-inch Sylvania television set and a cocker spaniel puppy!) or from the small question-and-answer cards held in the palm of his hand:

“Okay, Jackie, here’s Question One: In 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed to the New World with three ships: the Niña, the Pinta, and...what was the name of his third ship?”

Without a pause, I yelled, “The Santa Maria!”

I heard Warren say “RIGHT!” and the audience applauded. Warren proceeded. “Question Two: In the current movie, what actor-singer plays the title role of fairy-tale writer Hans Christian Andersen?”

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*verged in a wood and I, I took the one less traveled by, and that has*

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“Danny Kaye!”

“RIGHT again!”

This was even easier than answering questions at home. One more and I was a winner.

“Now, Jackie, here’s your musical question. Listen to the band play a few notes and name the popular song from which they come.”

I listened. What luck! How well I knew those notes. I sang the words to myself ... *When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie* ... until the band stopped, and then I shouted, ebulliently, “That’s *Amore!*”

“RIGHT!” screamed Warren. Out came Bess with my new puppy.

The dog died within the week, but my celebrity lingered in the neighborhood, in my family, and at school.

No one knew that the fix had been in. It never even occurred to me that I had been anything but so, so smart ...

... until the newspapers revealed those scandalous secret arrangements by which the winners and losers on supposedly fair TV quiz shows had been pre-ordained by producers and executives. Then I realized just how smart I had been on the all-too-accurately named *The Big Payoff*.

## *Side Trip*

*Arlene Pineo*

When misery followed me day and night, I decided to run away from the Dempsey foster home. My two dollars wouldn't go far. I needed a plan. There were a lot of tobacco farms in St. Mary's County along the Potomac. I figured someone might let even a ten-year-old work for a few bucks.

I went upstairs to the attic where we all slept. I had a couple of T-shirts, some panties and a pair of jeans. All of it fit inside a pillowcase. I climbed in bed with my clothes and sneakers on. Downstairs, the kids argued over TV programs, a scary movie or the Orioles' game. Mrs. Dempsey snored on the sofa.

The stuffy attic stunk of old urine, so I breathed through my mouth and kept the covers pulled up to my chin. I like to died from the heat before the boys turned off the movie. Mrs. Dempsey woke up drunk as a skunk, banged around the kitchen, knocking over chairs while the twins snickered. Pretty soon they came upstairs.

It was way past midnight, maybe closer to two, when I crawled out of bed. I unlocked the back door, slipped outside into the blessed clean night air. Moonlight shone on the corn field. In the distance, the river washed against the sea walls. I filled my lungs and struck out through the field. I thought hard about what to do. Word of a runaway spreads fast, though as long as my foster Mom got her check for my keep, I'd be safe.

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*with no obstacles, it probably doesn't lead anywhere." Frank A. Clark*

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It was cooler. The wind having changed directions brought whiffs of manure and hay and replaced the tidal smells of the Chesapeake Bay. There wasn't any cover through the corn fields in the middle of August. Heat lightning flickered from cloud to cloud, but I wasn't scared. Excited. I thought of myself as pretty smart to outwit the old lady.

My feet hurt, probably because I'd outgrown my sneakers. And I'd run out of the burst of energy of my escape. I'd walked for a long time, although I wasn't sure how far I'd gone. I saw a dirt road that would take my feet to freedom. Ahead, the dark shape of a large building looked like a barn. Even if there was a farm house, I didn't see myself knocking on someone's door. People in the country usually had at least one dog. I didn't know much about dogs, except the big ones scared me.

The building turned out to be a long tobacco shed with open spaces between the slats for the walls. I felt my way around to a pair of double doors hanging open on rusty hinges. I pulled open a door. It smelled sort of nice inside, except for the dust. I got to coughing and wheezing until I had to sit down. I took off my sneakers to give my feet a rest, leaned back against the shed door to watch the sky and think.

Probably I'd gone about three or four miles – not nearly far enough – but if I stayed off the road to Piney Point, I'd be safe. Though I tried to have a plan for tomorrow, I fell asleep, hugging the pillowcase with my spare underwear.

In the morning my sneakers had disappeared. I couldn't figure out how. Then I saw pieces of the rubber soles next to a dog turd in the dirt. My sneakers were torn to shreds.

I walked across the dirt road into the next field where the tobacco had been picked. Dry tobacco stubble hardened by the summer's heat hurt my feet. It made me all the more determined to go on. Turning back never entered my mind. But my big plan

to run away had left out a few details like food and water. It dawned on me I might be even thirstier before the day ended.

When the sun got high, the heat shimmered through the cloud of dust from the tobacco fields. I kept walking, hoping to find a tree for some shade and branches to climb in case something chased me. My throat went so dry it hurt. I found a few pebbles to roll around on my tongue.

The road came to a bend where tall blackberry thickets, swarming with bees, grew on both sides. My stomach growled with thoughts of how good they'd taste. The brambles moved. A head in a bandana stuck out, a hand emerged holding a tin bucket.

"Shit!" said the head as I watched it gradually turn into a black woman in patched overalls. "Too many snakes for the likes of me."

I backed up in case a snake slid out. The woman, old and bent, had the weathered skin of an old boot when she worked her way out of the brambles, grunting and cussing. Her eyes widened at the sight of me. "Who you?"

"I'm Jessie." I stared at the glistening berries. "And I'm really, really thirsty, Ma'am."

She thrust the pail at me. "Take you a handful, girl."

She took me to a shack she called her "place," where she kept chickens and umpteen cats. She had a funny gait, dragging one swollen foot so we walked real slow. She wasn't much bigger than me and said her name was Noony Sparks. I got to drink water at her hand pump before I fell asleep on her porch.

Noony let me hang around for a few days. She bandaged my sore feet in rags soaked in a comfrey poultice and fed me sweet potato pone. Her "place," surrounded by thick woods, stood in a clearing in what had once been a farm. All that was left was her shack and a silo without a roof.

When the moon rose, headlights bobbed along the dirt road toward her shack. “You kin watch, but keep still, you,” she said.

Old cars and pickups rattled to a stop. Men got out carrying cages with squawking roosters and filed into the roofless silo. I followed them under the guarded eyes of Noony, suddenly in charge – kerosene lanterns hung only where she allowed.

The men, mostly black, lined the silo’s walls behind a chicken wire fence with their cages. They passed whiskey bottles and jugs between themselves. Noony limped around collecting money in a baseball cap. A teenager dressed in town clothes took a blackboard with names and numbers, hung it on a nail and a low rumble of excitement began.

Her face glistening in the yellow lamplight, Noony climbed onto a wooden crate, holding up her hand for silence. “First round. All ya’ll place your bets.”

They called it a cockfight, I’d later learn. Thrust into the ring, roosters fought to their bloody deaths. They wore metal spikes on their legs to attack each other in a crazy war of feathers and spilled guts and chicken shit while the men yelled. This was too much for me. I had to run outside before the first round ended. Noony didn’t see me go. The fights would go on all night, I figured, so I made myself as comfortable as possible inside the shack. I had a queer feeling the ruckus inside the silo broke the law. In my view, it was wrong to hurt birds and animals, except big dogs who eat a person’s sneakers.

The awful noise grew, made bigger by the silo’s height. I pulled one of Noony’s quilts over my head. The yelling seemed to last forever like a TV set no one thinks to turn off. The distant hum of motors made me uneasy. As tired as anyone could be, I went outside to see who or what headed this way. They didn’t use headlights.

Police! They were everywhere. A loudspeaker boomed, “Come out with your hands up!” State police vans filled the



clearing. The men poured out of the silo with their hands over their heads, but a few fast ones slipped into the pines. A truck drove in with a sign that said Humane Society. The roosters got loose, attacked each other, scared Noony's cats into the woods, then took after the people with their useless nets. It was better than a circus.

Noony was the last one out of the silo. With her bad foot she couldn't outrun the police. I didn't see who hauled her away because I hid in the privy until the last cops drove off, then I went back to the silo. One lamp lit up the mess inside the cock ring. Did it ever stink! I kicked some empty whiskey bottles around, trying to think where to go or what to do. Under Noony's crate was the baseball cap full of dollar bills. Now I'd pretty nearly go anywhere I wanted. What I hadn't counted on was the last cop to drive away. He waited for me by the blackberry patch.

I had a side trip to Leonardtown's Juvenile Hall.

## *breathe deep*

*Sheryl L. Nelms*

whole wheat bread  
baking a crisp crust  
on a December morning

a cedar shelter belt  
after a sudden shower

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*him is the aspiration of every human being in our beclouded and tem-*

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fresh mown bluegrass  
under the July sun

hamburgers grilling  
over a charcoal fire

red clover  
blooming  
in a Kansas field

apple muffins  
split and steaming cinnamon  
as the butter melts

a Peace rose  
in a crystal bowl  
on my kitchen table

my baby boy  
bathed and powdered  
cuddling against my cheek

life is full  
just breathe  
deep

## *My Father's Truck*

*Ellen E. Withers*

In the 1960s, my father was the proud owner of a basic pick-up truck with no interior carpet and no toolbox in the bed. Although a child, I loved the truck as much as my father did.

All of the tools he needed were carried around with him; they just rolled around deafeningly on the floor of the passenger compartment. All practical tools a man might need were found there. There were flashlights, pliers, screwdrivers, wrenches, hammers, jumper cables, batteries of various sizes and shapes, and tractor parts scattered under the seats and on the floorboards. When he took a sharp corner, his entire inventory of tools rolled past my feet.

Most of my days I rode with my mother in her car, so any opportunity to ride in my father's truck was a special treat. At a young age I learned to use caution to open the passenger door of the truck. I approached it warily, my feet strategically placed to avoid injury, making a long stretch to push the button on the handle with my thumb and pull back the door, never knowing what tool or tractor part might descend upon my tootsies. I tried to jump out of the way of falling items, but the effort was usually in vain. It didn't take many experiences of hopping around on one foot, howling in pain, to train myself to stand as far away from the door as physically possible.

Once inside, we'd roll down the window using the handle provided for that purpose, not with an electric knob found in

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*trievably from the right path, he stands still."* William Hazlitt ~§~ "If

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today's trucks. A breeze from open windows provided respite from the heat, as air-conditioning was not a luxury afforded in my dad's truck. Who needed air-conditioning when cranking down the window would cool you off just as well? My father felt real men didn't need the device and it's likely that he didn't want to pay extra for it either.

When I'd look over at my dad and see his elbow out the window, I, too, would put my elbow out the window. It didn't matter that I was a girl and a lady should never be seen riding with her elbow hanging out of a truck. I relished the freedom and the pure fun of truck travel with my dad.

As we drove, my father acknowledged all the oncoming vehicles on the road, usually by lifting his fingers from the top of the steering wheel, and the oncoming drivers did the same. I was convinced he knew everyone in the world.

The truck was useful for carrying fishing poles, tackle boxes and other equipment associated with fishing. I remember sitting between my parents with the minnow bucket at my feet, trying to catch the minnows with my hands. I'd try, usually fruitlessly, to keep the water from splashing out as we rounded corners or hit deep holes in the roads. Many times I chased a live minnow that I'd lost from my grasp around the interior of the truck. Once caught, I would place it back into the bucket, hoping the waterless adventure would not be detrimental.

Our journey home from our excursions usually included a stop for an ice cream cone. I'm the one who needed lots of napkins because I never seemed to finish my cone before the bottom became soft and started to drip. Unlike my mother, Dad never seemed to mind ice cream on his seats.

Mom would spend hours brushing the tangles out of my hair after my truck rides, telling me to put my hair in a rubber band next time, but I never did. I refused to sacrifice the joy of feeling the wind blowing across my face and through my hair while

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*you stop to be kind, you must swerve often from your path."* Mary

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riding in the truck. I felt sorry for girls who didn't have the chance to fish, ride in a truck with their dad, and spend the day exploring the countryside.

When it was time to learn how to drive, my father insisted I couldn't drive my mother's car with an automatic transmission until I mastered the three-on-the-column shift in his truck. Although his face was the picture of sheer torture as I tried to shift smoothly, Dad held his tongue when I ground the gears.

While I learned the fine art of clutch-to-gas-pedal transitions on this manual transmission, Dad would wave away anyone unlucky enough to get caught behind the truck on a hill or incline. I resented the sneer on people's faces as they circled around us while I struggled to master the hill, but Dad laughed. He explained it was the same with anyone learning to drive a standard transmission.

When I left for college, the aging truck was conscripted into service. The peeling paint and rusty fenders made me feel quite conspicuous as we pulled into the parking lot of my dorm with other freshmen disembarking from mini-vans and sleek sedans.

Once settled into my new home, I waved to my parents as they got into the old truck. It was my independence day. I should have been happy, but found that melancholy was a more accurate description of my mood. The twinge of pain I felt as the small red lights of the truck disappeared into the darkness surprised me.

My mother, my father and the truck were a little worse for wear, but they'd carried me through some of the most important lessons in life and for that, I'll be eternally grateful.

The lessons came back to me when my own children were born. With my boy and girl, I once again experienced fishing, the joy of bumping along the countryside in a truck with your elbow out the window, and dripping ice cream cones.

## *Summer Child*

*Linda Kuzyk*

Look down...

Bare feet

Small, tan, sturdy

Avoiding sharp stones, thistles, bumblebees

Earth

Shades of green, patches of brown

Wild flowers, bees, butterflies, gentle breezes

Look up and around...

Summer sky

Azure, occasional white shapes teasing the imagination

Crows, gulls, swallows surfing air currents

Summer views

Ocean – blue, calm, serene, inviting

Forest – always a sanctuary

Look Within...

Freedom

Long summer days, outside in the sun

Totally alive

Wisdom

The child within, barefoot, free, alive

The elder remembers, smiles, and takes off her shoes

## *The Possum That Changed My Life*

*Thelma Zirkelbach*

I am a member of a club I never wanted to join: The Society of the Recently Widowed. I never wanted to go it alone. I'm a team player, a tandem rider. I had a roommate after college, a partner in my business and two husbands – at different times, of course.

Widowhood puts me in good company. In most species, from humans to chimpanzees, to chickens and even fruit flies, females outlive males. I thought I had outsmarted biology by falling in love with and marrying a man five years younger than I. I hadn't counted on cancer depriving me of my spouse. But what seemed like an annoying sore throat was the first symptom of acute myelogenous leukemia, an insidious disease that would claim my husband's life in less than a year.

Widow. I hate that word. It evokes a dried up old lady with a prune face, squeaky voice and faltering step. Mostly it means "alone." I didn't want "alone." I didn't think I could bear it.

My husband Ralph was the center of my life, my compass, my best friend and confidante. Even while he was hospitalized the last seven months of his life, he talked me through every problem, every decision.

Suddenly he was gone. Our life was over; my life had begun.

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*"No human being, however great, or powerful, was ever so free as a fish."*

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I thought I had prepared myself, but no one is ever prepared for a loved one's end. Death isn't real until it happens. Even then, you can't believe you'll never share another conversation, another argument, another hug. How would I make my way emotionally, financially, practically?

There is a Yiddish proverb that says, "*Az me muz, ken men;* When one must, one can." I resolved to make that my mantra. My first venture into independence came when I arrived home from Ralph's funeral in Iowa. The house seemed larger and darker than I remembered. I sank down in Ralph's chair, and my future stared me in the face. Evenings of loneliness to come.

Then I told myself I'd lost my husband, but I hadn't lost his voice. His greeting was still on our answering machine, saying in a flat, Midwestern twang, "You have reached the Zirkelbachs. Please leave a message at the sound of the tone. Thank you." I'd keep his greeting there for practical reasons. It's safer to have a man's voice answer the phone. But more importantly, hearing his voice was the closest I could be to him.

One day I was really lonely for the sound of Ralph's voice. I picked up the phone. There was no dial tone. I tried another phone. Dead. I tried all six of our phones. None of them worked. A searing pain hit my chest. With the phone dead, Ralph's voice was gone. Crying, I called my daughter Lori on my cell. She was tired and grouchy and had no suggestions at all.

I wandered into Ralph's study and stared at the console, pushed button after button to no avail. Could this happen at a worse time? I'd buried my husband and now the last vestige of him was as unreachable as his body.

I sat in his chair and rested my head on the desk. My gaze traveled to the floor. And there I saw the telephone cord. Unplugged. I plugged it in. Then I raced into the bedroom and grabbed my cell. Holding my breath, I dialed our number. The answering machine picked up. "You have reached —"



Laughing with relief, I called Lori. “Guess what. I fixed it.”

“How?”

“I plugged it in.”

Lori chuckled. “Your first technological triumph.”

Only a small one. Technology is not my friend. When my hard drive crashed, hurling a completed manuscript into cyberspace, I felt as if huge chunks of my life had evaporated.

After grieving the hard drive for a month and berating myself for not backing up my work, I sat down and rewrote the manuscript on the new drive. Other household problems cropped up: a gas leak in my hot water heater, air-conditioning coils that gave out, a broken fence.

The first thing my grandson said after Ralph died was, “What will Thelma do if something breaks down?” Usually I cry. Then I pay someone to repair it. Last week I fixed a leaky toilet all by myself. Ralph wouldn’t have believed it.

As I trudged through the first year of widowhood, I survived a fall in the middle of the night that required a trip to the emergency room for stitches – I drove myself – a carpal tunnel release and a hysterectomy. I slogged through the legal quagmire that follows death. Emotionally, I took baby steps: joined a grief group, filled a memory box, cleaned Ralph’s office. Each was a move toward independence, but I didn’t feel I’d arrived until I met the possum.

One Friday I woke in the middle of the night to the sound of breaking glass. Instead of being frightened, which would have been logical, I was annoyed. My cats had probably had a fight and knocked something off a shelf.

I got up to look and found Toby, Cat Number One, asleep. Then I heard a meow from my bathroom. Tiki, my second cat, sat with ears perked, tail swishing back and forth.

From the corner of my eye, I saw something move, something gray. Another cat? No, sitting on my counter, staring

placidly at me, was a possum. He looked enormous, as big as a Great Dane. Of course he wasn't, but at 2:00 a.m., who's measuring? Our gazes met and held. We were members of two rival gangs, staring each other down. Shades of *West Side Story*. The Jets versus the Possums.

What to do? Certainly not go in and confront the animal, not with those sharp teeth and vicious looking claws. "Dammit, Ralph," I muttered as I slammed the bathroom door, "I need you." Then I asked, "If Ralph were here, what would he do?" I realized he would have been no better able to deal with a wild animal than I was, so I did exactly what he would have done. I made sure the bathroom door was securely shut, got in bed, and went back to sleep. Next morning I called around and located a private animal control company. By the time they arrived, the possum had disappeared. "I'm not crazy," I told the young man who stood in my bathroom. "I know there's a possum in here."

"Don't worry. We'll find him."

Now that help had come, I was worried for the possum. "What will you do to him?"

"Let him go in the woods."

They searched and found my guest hiding in a large bag in my closet and took him away.

Soon after they left, a friend called. "You sound tired," she remarked.

"I am," I admitted. "I had an overnight visitor."

"Oh," she said. "I didn't know you were dating."

"Well, I had a male guest but he was a possum."

"All night? Weren't you scared?"

"No," I answered. "After I found it, I went back to sleep."

"You're a tough lady."

Me? I hadn't considered that. But she was right. I'd handled the possum encounter with aplomb. No pounding hysterically on my neighbor's door or phoning my children in the middle of

the night. Of the two of us, the possum was probably more frightened by the encounter.

I don't know how he felt afterward, but for me our staredown was a surprisingly transformative experience, working wonders for my self-esteem. Now I felt brave enough to face anything. Well, not a bear or the slopes of Everest, but strong enough for situations I might reasonably expect to encounter. Thanks to that midnight visit, I have become a self-actualized person, confident that I can meet whatever life tosses at me.

Not that I've stopped missing my husband. I long for his sure hands when I need something done that seemed inconsequential when Ralph was here: unscrewing a tightly closed jar, getting a box down from a high shelf, changing a light bulb I can't reach even with a step ladder, fastening a necklace. I have spent special days alone – New Year's Eve, Ralph's birthday, Valentine's Day – mourning for the person I loved most.

Grief is a puzzle. It comes and goes, washing over one at unexpected moments. Going through a file, I come across a paper with Ralph's handwriting and start to cry. Cuddled under Ralph's old brown robe, I sit on the couch that looks out onto my garden. On New Year's Eve at midnight, I dialed our phone number to hear his voice on the answering machine so that, in some way, we could welcome the New Year together.

As I find my way alone, the path is sometimes rocky, sometimes smooth. I'm pleased that I'm stronger, more self-reliant than I was when I was half a couple. Because I have to be, and when one must, one can.

## *Off the Mark*

*Jim Wilson*

I will affix no labels  
And  
Make no judgments —  
Because  
I might  
    Be right.

And I might crush  
Some struggling soul —  
Who  
Had planned  
To change  
    Tonight.